

# STATISTICS & MEASUREMENT

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## FREMONT RIDER'S LEGACY

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We marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Fremont Rider's *The Scholar and the Future of the Research Library* in 1994. Rider argued that, given their historical pattern of growth, research libraries would have to change radically because they would grow so large so quickly that their very size would force changes in operations. This work was one of several of his that sounded an alarm about the implications of growth to academic libraries in the near future.

Rider's conclusions about the nature of library growth have continued to be influential. For instance, *The Scholar* has been described as "seminal" by one writer and Rider's work "near-venerable" by another. Rider's conclusions about the nature of academic library growth (that libraries double in size every sixteen years) are still repeated although subsequent research has shown this prediction to be incorrect. However, it is safe to say that Rider is best remembered for something that he was wrong about but forgotten about many things he was right about: among them, the consequences of rapid growth of large libraries.

At the time he wrote the book, Rider was the Librarian at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. He had a varied career, having spent most of his life in publishing. If you had traveled in the 1920's you might have purchased his travel books on Bermuda (1924), California (1927), New York City (1924), or Washington, DC (1928). He also wrote *Are The Dead Alive?* (1909), a book he classified as "Psychical Research," and *The Great Dilemma of World Organization* (1946) which dealt with the post-WWII world. He also wrote pulp fiction. His interests, clearly, were broad.

After coming to Wesleyan, Rider began to write about libraries and his work can be characterized as visionary because he was a careful observer and was able to extrapolate from what he saw. *The Scholar* is best remembered for its conclusion that libraries double in size every sixteen years. But let Rider speak for himself with two often quoted passages: *Every scrap of statistical evidence that we can gather shows that, as far back as we can reach, the story is exactly the same. It seems, as stated, to be a mathematical fact that, ever since college and university libraries started in this country, they have, on the average, doubled in size every sixteen years.* (p. 8)

In addition, the pattern is consistent: *Research library growth has continued, without any significant change of rate, either downward or upward, for over thirty decades, and at a rate so uniform over so many years, and so uniform in so many different libraries, that it might almost seem as though some natural law were at work.* (pp. 15-16)

This talk of "natural laws" is heady stuff and subsequently there have been a number of articles written on this question and Rider's conclusions. Unfortunately, the data simply do not support his ideas about the consistent,

mathematical nature of library growth. We now know that libraries do not double in size every 16 years, the data are not uniform, nor is there a natural law to help us predict library growth.

Nonetheless, Rider did grasp the fact of growth and did electrify the library world with his predictions. He was also right in the relentless implications of growth.

Consider the size and staff of a sample of libraries in 1945, the year after *The Scholar* was published and compare the

numbers with today. (See accompanying box.)

Clearly, managing these institutions in 1945 was a simpler task that it is today and Rider understood that fact first. It is interesting to speculate what our colleagues in 1945 would have thought if they could have known that so many ARL members today would be bigger than Harvard was then.

It is largely forgotten today that Rider suggested an ingenious solution for the "problem" of size in *The Scholar*: microcards. It is also forgotten the argument for this solution consumed the bulk of the book (217 pages), while his argument about the nature of this growth took only 17 pages.

Rider sought other solutions to the rapid increase in the size of libraries he foresaw. Probably the ideas that caused the most controversy were those dealing with binding and shelving because he favored a type of compact shelving including shaving the books to make them smaller!

Characteristically, after Rider retired from Wesleyan he continued working. He founded the Godfrey Memorial Library, a genealogical library in Middletown, wrote *Rider's International Classification*, a classification system for smaller libraries, and an autobiography. No other work of his, however, had the influence of *The Scholar*, a work still influential after fifty years.

	1945	1995
Institution	Volumes Held	Volumes Held
Brown	648,469	2,762,196
California, Berkeley	1,260,504	8,242,196
Harvard	4,702,292	13,143,330
Indiana	590,036	5,677,326
Virginia	443,128	4,165,805

  

Institution	Staff	Staff
Brown	50	252
California, Berkeley	82	664
Harvard	154	1,116
Indiana	68	479
Virginia	61	359

\* Figures from 1945/95 were used for comparison purposes.